Essay and Articles

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CATEGORY: ESSAY AND ARTICLES

Had enough safe sex? Try safe psychedelia.

How close are you to achieving cosmic consciousness? According to former LSD researcher Stanislav Grof, at any moment any of us may be just a few breaths away. "Breathing techniques have been used throughout centuries, if not millennia, to help achieve mystical experiences or non ordinary mental states," says Dr. Grof, 67, the developer, with his wife, of a system called Holotropic Breathwork. He believes Breathwork is a quick and easy method to break down boundaries between the conscious and unconscious mind–without dropping 500 micrograms of ergot extract. "Many people in this society are on the verge of what I call a spiritual emergency–but they keep suppressing it. Through Breathwork, they can access that state in a controlled manner."

Grof lives in Mill Valley, California, but comes to New York annually to offer seminars at the Open Center. In person, he's a conservative-looking Eastern European man with short gray hair, wearing a gray jacket and slacks. Close to 100 people signed up for this year's three day, $300 seminar.

He explains how Western industrial society is the only culture in world history to deny the validity of mystical experience. "In every other tradition, it has been understood that you need to spend time exploring other dimensions. In preindustrial cultures healing is always associated with nonordinary states."

methods to alter breathing patterns—holding the initiates' heads underwater, for example, or blowing smoke at them to induce choking. From Hindus in ancient India to the Santo Daime cult in modern Brazil, many cultures have taken psychedelics to achieve transcendent states. Grof describes the Eleusinian Mysteries in Greece, where a parade of classical luminaries from Plato to Aristophanes drained an unknown psychedelic cocktail and communed with the infinite. The ritual continued for 2000 years, before being stopped by a party-pooping pope in the fourth century A.D.

Grof began his research into psychedelics in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s. In the late '60s and early '70s, as chief of psychiatric research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, he used LSD in an effort to treat neurotics, break alcoholics and drug addicts of their addictions, and help terminal cancer patients deal with their fear of death. But government animus turned against psychedelics, and the Maryland study has never been repeated, despite its success.

Grof's study of Breathwork grows out of his work with LSD: "After a psychedelic sessions, some of my patients felt great, but sometimes there would even be an intensification of their symptoms—if you find yourself physically uncomfortable, it usually relates to something emotional. A pain in the shoulder might be due to suppressed anger, for example. A little bodywork might release the pressure and complete the process. When something was left unfinished, I discovered that having people sit and concentrate on their breathing often allowed them to release the problem." At the Esalen Institute in the '70s, he pursued his research into nonordinary states through other means. "We hosted 30 separate monthlong seminars," he recalls. "We invited Yogis and Sufi teachers, Zen monks, neo-Reichian therapists, tribal shamans. We experimented with different breathing techniques—such as alternating between breathing form the diaphragm or the top of the lungs." He was astonished to discover that the extraordinary states accessed through powerful psychedelics could also be reached through the breath.

technique. Seeking "metaconsciousness," they sometimes flail about as they breathe, moving their arms and legs as a runner might. "The workshop often looks like a scene from an insane asylum." Percussive tribal music plays in the background. "You focus on the breath, as in Vipassana Meditation," says Miller, who believes Grof will someday be placed in the same category as Freud and Jung. He has seen people "experience Christ's agonies on the cross," or announce that they have become "a cell in the petal of a rose." Other people feel "body sensations that don't really have a story. Whatever it is possible to experience as a human being, it is possible to experience through this work." Breathwork is a much more controlled experience than psychedelics—you can always sit up, relax your breath, and take off the eyeshade. "With psychedelics," Miller notes, "once you've eaten the mushrooms, you've eaten the mushrooms."

What traditional psychoanalysis might consider prime examples of susceptibility to suggestion, Grof takes more or less at face value. "Through episodes of nonordinary consciousness, you can access your repressed childhood memories, get memories from your birth experience, experience your past lives," he says. In fact, he puts a lot of stress on birth, which he has analyzed in numerous books, breaking it down into various stages. He believes traumas experienced during birth account for a large proportion of later psychological problems. "So many people feel claustrophobia, but it is difficult to believe that the imprint comes from their daily lives," says Grof, who associates it with a constricted experience in the womb. "Asthma is very often generated as a reaction to a birth trauma. I have known at least 18 people who have cleared asthma through the breathwork after reliving a number of situations that involve choking."

The openness of Grof's thinking and its macrocosmic scale almost guarantee that he'll remain a figure marginalized by mainstream science, like Wilhelm Reich, chemist Sasha Shulgin, and so many others. "After the individual has been confronted with a considerable sample of transpersonal experiences, the Newtonian-Cartesian world view becomes untenable as a serious philosophical concept," he writes in *Beyond Brain* (1985). "The universe is seen as an infinite web of adventures in consciousness,

To the skyptic, it sounds like suspiciously easy travel to other planets. Grof himself admits that part of the breathwork's effectiveness may be due to suggestion. "Very often when participants realize they are in a place where others are supportive of nonordinary experiences," he says, "they can go into the state before we even start the process." It may seem difficult to belive that Holotropic Breathwork can achieve in a few hours what sadhus in India or Tibetan Buddhist monks reach through years of patient labor and disciplined meditation. But, as Miller says, "the proof of the pudding is in the tasting," and the only way to know is through experience. Perhaps, for many of us, access to what Grof calls a "spiritual emergency" lies close at hand precisely because we think ourselves so totally removed from it.

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